



# South Central District Health

*Keeping your family & community healthy*

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## WEST NILE VIRUS

### **What is West Nile virus and how is it transmitted?**

West Nile Virus is a virus that infects humans, birds, mosquitoes, horses, and some other mammals. The principal transmission cycle of West Nile virus involves several species of mosquitoes and various species of birds. Mosquitoes become infected with West Nile virus when they feed on a bird carrying the virus in its blood. After 10 to 14 days, the virus can be transmitted to another bird, person, or other animal that the mosquito bites. During the blood feeding the mosquito injects the virus, contained in the saliva, into the bird, animal, or person where the virus may cause illness. **West Nile virus is not spread from person to person.**

### **What animals can be infected with West Nile virus?**

The American crow has been the most visibly affected animal in the United States. Crows appear to show signs of illness in a community days to weeks before any human cases have occurred. For that reason reports of their death may be a good indicator that the virus has moved into a community. Magpies, blue jays, raptors, and ravens are also susceptible to the West Nile virus, and therefore reports of their death are also important.

Horses can also become seriously ill if infected. Fort Dodge Animal Health has developed a new equine vaccine and horse owners should contact their veterinarian for more information.

For hunters, proper cooking kills West Nile virus, so there is no danger in eating wild game.

### **What are the symptoms of West Nile virus?**

Most people who are infected with West Nile virus will not develop symptoms. Some people may become ill 3 to 15 days after the bite of an infected mosquito. Evidence suggests that a minority of infected persons develop a mild illness with fever, headache, body aches, and sometimes skin rash and swollen glands. There are no long-term effects due to mild illness.

West Nile virus infection infrequently results in severe illness, however, known as West Nile encephalitis. Encephalitis is an inflammation of the brain that may be marked by headache, high fever, stiff neck, stupor, disorientation, coma, tremors, convulsions, muscle weakness, and paralysis. A small number of cases have been fatal. If you experience any of these symptoms you need to contact your medical care provider.

### **Who is at risk for West Nile virus?**

People are only at risk for becoming infected with West Nile virus when they are in areas where it is circulating in nature. To date, there has been no evidence that West Nile virus is circulating in nature here in Idaho. In northern states, West Nile only circulates in nature during the summer months. Once the first killing frost occurs there is no longer a risk. The risk of West Nile encephalitis (the severe form of the disease) is higher for persons 50 years of age and older.

### **How is West Nile infection treated?**

No specific therapy is available for infection with West Nile virus. In the case of West Nile encephalitis, intensive supportive therapy may be required.

## **What can you do to prevent West Nile infection?**

### **Avoid mosquito bites.**

- Apply insect repellent to exposed skin when you go outdoors. The most effective repellents contain DEET (N, N-diethyl-m-toluamide). The more DEET a repellent contains, the longer time it gives protection from mosquito bites. DEET concentrations higher than 50% do not increase the length of protection.
- Use care in applying repellent to children: don't put repellent on their hands, and be careful to avoid the mouth and eye areas. Products containing 10% or less DEET are the most appropriate for children aged 2-12 years.
- Whenever possible, wear protective clothing such as long sleeves, long pants, and socks while outdoors.
- Spray clothing with repellents containing DEET or permethrin, because mosquitoes may bite thru thin clothing.
- Consider staying indoors between dusk and dawn, which is peak mosquito biting time.
- Fix or install window and door screens to keep mosquitoes out of buildings.

### **Reduce the mosquito population around your home. Most mosquitoes will breed in containers that hold water.**

- Dispose of tin cans, plastic containers, ceramic pots, or similar things that hold water.
- Remove all discarded tires on your property.
- Drill holes in the bottoms of recycling containers that are kept outdoors.
- Make sure roof gutters drain properly, and clean clogged gutters in the spring and fall.
- Remove leaf debris.
- Change water in birdbaths and ponds regularly.
- Keep vegetation and debris away from the edge of ponds.
- Clean and chlorinate swimming pools, outdoor saunas and hot tubs, and make sure pool covers have no standing water on them.